

# The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the  
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

Editor: DR. PAUL CARUS.  
Assistant Editor: T. J. McCORMACK.

Associates: { E. C. HEGELER.  
MARY CARUS.

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VOL. XVII. (NO. 5)

MAY, 1903.

NO. 564

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CHICAGO


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RALPH WALDO EMERSON.

Born May 25th, 1803. Died April 27th, 1882.

Courtesy of W. L. Haskell, Chicago.

*Frontispiece to The Open Court.*

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## THE MINISTRY OF EMERSON.

BY MONCURE D. CONWAY.

A THOUSAND years ago the admirable Faizi, the Persian forerunner of Emerson, described himself as "a freethinker who belongs to a thousand sects." His avatar in Concord may be described as a freethinker to whom the thousand sects belonged. When Dean Stanley returned from America he said that he went to many churches of different denominations, but whoever might be the preacher the sermon was always by Emerson. But something of the same kind was going on in England and Scotland, and even in the Dean's own Abbey. I remember walking through Westminster Abbey with Phillips Brooks, when we came upon a large placard hung on a pillar on which were printed Emerson's lines:

"O'er England's abbeys bends the sky,  
As on its friends with kindred eye;  
For, out of Thought's interior sphere  
These wonders rose to upper air;  
And Nature gladly gave them place,  
Adopted them into her race,  
And granted them an equal date  
With Andes and with Ararat."

In Ceylon I formed instant friendship with a learned Buddhist by the discovery of a fraternal tie in our love of Emerson, in whom he found the best interpreter of his religion. And in London I found men of widely different position, ideas, and aims,—Lord Mayor Waterlow, the historian Froude, Charles Bradlaugh,—whose lives had been influenced by Emerson.

The universal love and veneration for Emerson in the different religious organisations in America is phenomenal. His freethought



utterances are fundamentally the same as those of much abused "Tom Paine," and more sweeping than those of persecuted Theodore Parker. Emerson has the distinction of being the first repudiator of sacraments, supernaturalism, biblical authority, and of Christianity itself in every form, who suffered no kind of martyrdom. That might be partly explained by the fact that his method and his style of writing did not appeal to the masses and could not disturb their faith. They who sought him were mostly those already unsettled, and pastors were not thrown into the panics, from which persecutions proceed, by a scholar who came not in their fold and had no marks of the wolf. But that does not explain why they should love him; why a Methodist Conference in Boston should adjourn for a pilgrimage to his house in Concord; why he should be honored in schools and colleges with the sympathy of orthodox ministers and laymen. It is plain to me that since the revolutionary discovery of Darwin, supplanting the biblical legend of a divine Creation with the revelation of a predatory universe, and connecting man with the lower animals, the poetic idea of evolution which Emerson adopted twenty-five years before Darwin was heard from, and in various essays developed into a natural religion, has become the alternative of what is dreaded as "materialism," and the refuge of Theism. Christendom has been compelled to accept the scientific fact of Evolution, which disproves the doctrine of successive creations, but for the dynamic creator thus lost there is given by Emerson's vision a divine life flowing through Nature, organising it in purposed variations, developing it in harmony with the progression of man. Emerson preached and sang this theme with every variety of scientific illustration for nearly fifty years. His essays on nature constitute a Vedas of the scientific age, in which instead of man's ancient worship of sun, cloud, star, these glorious objects unite in celebration of Man. As ancient faith covered the starry sky with sacred forms so that none could see the planets in themselves but always Orion, Arcturus, and the rest, the earth newly revealed by Lamarck and St. Hilaire was by Emerson overlaid with sublime pictures of Nature's progression to find spiritualisation in her divine child,—Man. The present generation cannot realise this historically, but we whom Emerson inspired to go forth with these new revelations and prophecies,—and a considerable number we were,—witnessed the steady advance of a new cosmogony in the churches, of course expressed by every preacher in the phrases of his theology. My belief is that it is now impossible for an educated Christian minister to see the same theologic sky as



that which existed before Emerson discovered new galaxies and spiritualised the old ones; and that even if he has never read Emerson.

Emerson resigned his pulpit in Boston in September, 1832, because his Unitarian congregation considered it essential that the symbols of a great man's blood, shed eighteen centuries before, should be partaken at their altar. The Persian Faizi, to remember him again, said: "My own blood is the basis of the wine of my enthusiasm." Emerson in his final sermon said: "It is my desire, in the office of a Christian minister, to do nothing which I cannot do with my whole heart." But there was no pulpit for a man who wished to feed men with "real presence" blood from his own heart. Bereft of his young wife and his congregation in that same year—his thirtieth—his health broken, Emerson travelled a few months in Europe, and that winter—1833—1834—gave the first discourse of his unchurched ministry. The subject was "The Relation of Man to the Globe." In 1833 Edward Emerson sent me extracts from this discourse which I read before the Royal Institution of Great Britain, and which amazed the scientific men. This for example: "Man is made, the creature who seems a refinement on the form of all who went before him, and more perfect in the image of his Maker by the gift of moral nature; but his limbs are only a more exquisite organisation,—say, rather, the finish of the rudimental forms that have been already sweeping the sea and creeping in the mud: the brother of his hand is even now cleaving the Arctic sea in the fin of the whale, and innumerable ages since was pawing the marsh in the flipper of the saurus."

As there is a Pre-Darwinian and a Post-Darwinian epoch in science, there is a corresponding Pre-Emersonian and Post-Emersonian epoch in American religion. For Emerson, having found in man the meaning and purpose of the Globe, recognised that this sum of every creature's best physically was but a sheath of the distinctive and rational Man. Like the protozoa fighting and devouring each other in the drop of water, men kill and devour each other in their big globe. "Civilisation is a chick in the egg." Saurian passions survive Saurian forms in the masses of men. Here and there a Jesus, Plato, Shakespeare, appears as a "pattern on the mount" of the normal Man. Emerson said, "I distrust masses, and wish to bring individuals out of them." By the development of variants the masses might be gradually sufficiently controlled to render favorable the conditions for the creation of Man. Emerson then went about among us diffusing all the ethical sunshine and

soft rains, and carrying the gentlest pruning knife, as if in a flower garden, and rejoicing over every bud that peeped out. He never said anything to us about the service of God: it was man that needed service. Nor did he talk about Christianity or immortality. "Give me insight in to-day, and you may have the antique and future worlds."

Whenever I hear in Handel's *Messiah* the gracious theme, "He shall feed his flock like a shepherd and gently carry them that are with young," there arises the face of that man whose far-reaching words found us in our several solitudes and led us away from our homes and creeds. I suppose that most of these received from him letters such as the following, sent me by my dear friend Maria Harrison of Cincinnati. It is dated at Concord in the October of 1838, just at the time when he was being almost raised to the dignity of a martyr on account of his famous address to the graduates in Divinity College of July 15,—the Address which evoked Theodore Parker, and which Dr. Furness described as the Fifth Gospel.

"I hasten to say that I read these expressions of an earnest character—of your faith, of your hope—with extreme interest; and if I can contribute any aid by sympathy or suggestion to the solution of those great problems that occupy you, I shall be very glad. But I think it must be done by degrees. I am not sufficiently master of the little truth I see to know how to state it in forms so general as shall put every mind in possession of my point of view. We generalise and rectify our expressions by continual efforts from day to day, from month to month, to reconcile our own light with that of our companions. So shall two inquirers have the best mutual action on each other. But I should never attempt a direct answer to such questions as yours. I have no language that could shortly present my state of mind in regard to each of them with any fidelity; for my state of mind in each is in no way final and detached, but tentative, progressive, and strictly connected with the whole circle of my thoughts. It seems to me that to understand any man's thoughts respecting the Supreme Being we need an insight into the general habit and tendency of his speculations, for every man's idea of God is the last or most comprehensive generalisation at which he has arrived. But besides the extreme difficulty of stating our results on such questions in a few propositions, I think, my dear sir, that a certain religious feeling deters us from the attempt. I do not gladly utter any deep conviction of the soul in any company where I think it will be contested—no, nor unless I think it will be welcome. Truth has already ceased to be itself if polemically said; and if the soul would utter oracles, as every soul should, it must live for itself—keep itself right-minded, observe with such awe its own topics of the hour, unless they be its own. I believe that most of the speculations and difficulties that infest us we must thank ourselves for—that each mind, if true to itself, will, by living for the right and not importing into itself the doubts of other men, dissolve all difficulties, as the sun at midsummer burns up the clouds.

"Hence I think the aid we can give each other is only incidental, lateral, and sympathetic. If we are true and benevolent, we reinforce each other by every act

and word; your heroism stimulates mine, and your light kindles mine. The end of all this is, that I thank you heartily for the confidence of your letter, and beg you to use your earliest leisure to come and see me. It is very possible that I shall not be able to give you one definition; but I will show you with joy what I strive after and what I worship, as far as I can. Meantime I shall be very glad to hear from you by letter.—Your friend and servant,  
R. W. EMERSON.

I asked Emerson about his sermons at the Second Church in Boston. He said he had used many of them in his essays, though these were less ethical. He considered the chief fault of ministers to be a lack of veracity. Where creeds or churches are involved it seems difficult for their loyal supporters to be loyal also to truth. By this Emerson meant speaking the truth, and I have always understood the fact to be that as a physician might use stratagem to save a patient, or a lawyer to gain his case, so the clergyman was liable to use it to save souls from hell or from heresy. Emerson was equally aware of the radical's liability to libel his truth by stating it brutally. "Everything good is artistic," he said. There is a possible statement of the most unwelcome truth which would render it irresistible by any mind. Many times did I admire the art with which he would sweeten a denial by a fine affirmation. "Was not Christ sinless?" asked a pious lady. Emerson said, "The knowledge of good and evil through experience is an essential condition of intelligence, and that wisdom can hardly be denied Jesus." He had dislike of the spirit of proselytism. "I must not try to make a man another me." The great aim of the teacher was to make that man more fully himself.

Once I had the happiness to hear a sermon from Emerson, or rather one or two of his old sermons rolled together. After Theodore Parker went silent his congregation listened from Sunday to Sunday to various preachers, and one day in March 1863 I there heard Emerson. I sat on the platform in the Music Hall by the side of Mrs. Julia Ward Howe, where we were in a position to observe every expression of his countenance. While the anthem was being sung I saw that he was in radiant spirits, no doubt because the President's Proclamation of Emancipation had filled all of us with a great dawn of hope after our long gloom. But Emerson's sermon had nothing in it about the state of the country.

He began by calling attention to the tendency to simplification. The inventor knows that a machine is new and improvable when it has a great many parts. The chemists already find the infinite variety of things contained in sixty-six elements, and physicists promise that this number shall be reduced to twenty, ten, five.



Faraday declares his belief that all things will in the end be reduced to one element with two polarities. Religious progress has similarly been in the direction of simplification. Every great religion has in its ultimate development told its whole secret, concentrated its force, in some simple maxims. In our youth we talk of the various virtues, the many dangers and trials of life; as we get older we find ourselves returning to the proverbs of the nursery. In religion one old book serves many lands, ages, and varieties of character; nay, one or two golden rules out of the book are enough. The many teachers and scriptures are at last but various routes by which we always come to the simple law of obedience to the light in the soul. "Seek nothing outside of thyself," says one; "Believe nothing against thy own spirit," echoes another part of the world. Jesus said, "Be lowly; hunger and thirst after justice; of your own minds judge what is right." Swedenborg teaches that Heaven and Hell are the loves of the soul. George Fox removes the bushel from the light within. The substance of all morals is that a man should adhere to the path which the inner light has marked before him. The great waste in the world comes of the misapplication of energy. The great tragedies of the soul are strung on those threads not spun out of our own hearts. One records of Michael Angelo that he found him working on his statue with a lamp stuck in his cap, and it might almost symbolise the holier light of patient devotion to his heart. No matter what your work is, let it be yours; no matter if you are tinker or preacher, blacksmith or President, let what you are doing be organic, let it be in your bones, and you open the door by which the affluence of Heaven and Earth shall stream into you. You shall have the hidden joy: and shall carry success with you. Look to yourself rather than to materials; nothing is unmanageable in a good hand; no place slippery to a good foot; all things are clear to a good head. The sin of Dogmatism, of creeds and catechisms, is that they destroy mental character. The youth says that he believes when he is only browbeaten; he says he thinks so and so, when that so and so are the denial of any right to think. Simplicity and grandeur are thus lost; and with them the sentiment of obligation to a principle of life and honor. In the legends of the Round Table it is told, that a witch wishing to make her child supremely wise, prepared certain herbs and put them in a pot to boil, intending to bathe the child's eyes with the decoction. She set a shepherd boy to watch the pot whilst she went away. Whilst he stirred it a raven dropped a twig into the pot, which spattered three drops of



the liquid into the shepherd's eyes. Immediately all the future became as if passing before his eyes; and seeing that when the witch returned she meant to kill him, he left the pot and fled to the woods. Now if three drops of that all-revealing decoction should suddenly get into the eyes of every human being crowding along the streets some day, how many of them would still go on with the affair they are pursuing? Probably they would nearly all come to a dead stand. But there would, let us hope, be here and there a happy child of the Most High, who had taken hold of her



or his life's thread by sacred appointment. These would move on without even a pause: the unveiled future would show the futility of many schemes, the idleness of many labors; but all genuine aims would only be exalted, and shown in their eternal and necessary relations.

Finally, humility was, the speaker declared, the one element to which all virtues are reducible. "It was revealed unto me," said the old Quaker, "that what other men trample on must be thy food." It is the spirit that accepts our trust, and is thus the creator of character and the guide to power.

In closing this discourse the speaker recited at length the story of the proposed humiliation, and the victory through humility, of Fra Cristophero (in Manzoni's *I Promessi Sposi*), the nobleman who slew another in a brawl, in penitence for which he became a friar. When the slain man's brother demanded this Fra Cristophero's humiliation before the proud family—not that he cared much for his brother, a worthless fellow, but to make a page in the family history—the friar was eager so to atone for his deed. There was no attempt at effect in Emerson's descriptions—no gestures—yet the subtlest actor could not more have moved the vast audience. On his face was seen that face of the friar in which every eye read perfect sincerity and courage. We saw the friar, frank and fearless, kneeling to confess his wrong, and pleading no justification, ask pardon of those he had deprived of a brother. We saw his victory through humiliation, the servants kissing the hem of his coarse garment, the proud lord hastening to raise him, to disown anger, to offer him fine food which he could not taste, begging only a little bread and salt as a token of forgiveness; and finally, when Fra Cristophero had departed, through the company, kneeling for the blessing of him who had knelt, we heard the bewildered nobleman saying, "That devil of a monk, if he had knelt there longer, I believe I should have asked his pardon for killing my own brother." A smile beamed on the face of the speaker, and played on the faces before him at these last words; but by the time Emerson gathered up his pages and sat down, his listeners were in tears. For some moments the assembly of five thousand sat in a stillness that was sacred.

O my friend and father, even amid the vanishing away of some fair visions and hopes raised in my youth by thee, I realise that life had been worth living if only because of my never-ending happiness in knowing thee, and receiving inspiration and joy from teachings that left me no envy of those who gathered around any haloed prophet in the Past!